Middle English

'Middle English' - a period of roughly 300 years from around 1150 to around 1450 - is difficult to identify, because it is a time of transition between two eras that each have stronger definition: Old English and Modern English. Before this period we encounter a language which is chiefly Old Germanic in its character - in its sounds, spellings, grammar, and vocabulary. After this period we have a language which displays a very different kind of structure, with major changes having taken place in each of these areas, many deriving from the influence of French.

Continuity is mainly to be seen in texts of a religious, political, or administrative character, thousands of which have survived. Most of the surviving material is religious in character - about a third are collections of homilies. The writings of Ælfric, in particular, continued to be copied throughout the period, and these overlap with sermons from the twelfth century that are very clearly in an early form of Middle English.

Although the earliest surviving writings in the period are only about a century after the latest writings in Old English, Middle English texts feel very much closer to Modern English in their grammar and vocabulary. By the time we get to Chaucer, in the 14th century, we can find many phrases and sentences which – if we modernize the spelling - look just like an archaic version of Modern English, as in the opening of the *Canterbury Tales*:

> When that April with his showers sweet
> The drought of March hath pierced to the root
> And bathed every vein in such liquor
> Of which virtue engendered is the flower...

There is also a continuity of literary content. English readers today are aware of the subject-matter of the Middle English period in a way that they are not in relation to Old English. Chaucer's tales have been constantly retold, as has Thomas Malory's account of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table, and several modern Christmas carols are medieval in origin

The difference between Old and Middle English is primarily due to the changes that took place in grammar. Old English was a language which contained a great deal of inflectional variation; Modern English has hardly any. And it is during the Middle English period that we see the eventual disappearance of most of the earlier inflections, and the increasing reliance on alternative means of expression, using word order and prepositional constructions rather than word endings to express meaning relationships. All areas of grammar were affected. Among the new kinds of construction were the progressive forms of the verb (as in *I am going*), and the range of auxiliary verbs (*I have seen*, *I didn't go*, etc). The infinitive form of a verb starts to be marked by the use of a particle (*to go*, *to jump*). A new form of expressing relationships such as possession appeared, using *of* (as in *the pages of a book*). Several new pronouns appeared through the influence of Old Norse.

Other areas of language were also affected. The pronunciation system underwent significant change. Several consonants and vowels altered their values, and new contrastive units of sound ('phonemes') emerged. In particular, the distinction between the /f/ and /v/ consonants began to differentiate words (e.g. *grief* vs. *grieve*), as did that between /s/ and /z/ (e.g. *seal* vs. *zeal*). The *ng* sound at the end of a word also became contrastive (in Old English the *g* had always been sounded), so we now

find such pairs as *sin* vs. *sing*. And at the very end of the period, all the long vowels underwent a series of changes. The way sounds were spelled altered, as French scribes introduced their own spelling conventions, such as *ou* for *u* (*house*), *gh* for *h* (*night*), and *ch* for *c* (*church*).

The French influence on English in the Middle Ages is a consequence of the dominance of French power in England and of French cultural pre-eminence in mainland Europe in such areas as as law, architecture, estate management, music, and literature. Vocabulary was especially affected, such as in ecclesiastical architecture, where French architects in England adapted Continental sources for their cathedral designs. The associated terminology needed to express this shift of vision was very large, covering everything from building tools to aesthetic abstractions.

Each of the major literary works of the Middle English period provides evidence of the impact of French. By the time we reach the opening lines of *The Canterbury Tales*, around 1400, the French lexical content is a major linguistic feature: 8 of the 13 content words in the above quotation are from French - *April*, *March*, *pierced*, *vain*, *liquor*, *virtue*, *engendered*, *flower*. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, by the end of the Middle English period around 30 per cent of English vocabulary is French in origin.

Middle English also saw a huge increase in the use of affixes (prefixes and suffixes). Excluding inflectional endings, there are just over 100 prefixes and suffixes available for use in everyday English, and at least one of these will be found in around half of all the words in the language. It is during Middle English that we find the first great flood of these affixed words, with French introducing such (Latin-derived) prefixes as *con-*, *de-*, *dis-*, *en-*, *ex-*, *pre-*, *pro-*, and *trans-*, and such suffixes as *-able*, *-ance/-ence*, *-ant/-ent*, *-ity*, *-ment*, and *-tion* (at the time, usually spelled *-cion*). The suffixes were especially productive, as seen in the many words typified by *tournament*, *defendant*, *solemnity*, and *avoidance*. The *-tion* ending alone produced hundreds of creations, such as *damnation*, *contemplation*, and *suggestion*.

The flow of French loanwords into English reduced during the 15th century, but the overall rate of foreign borrowing did not, because of the growing influence of Latin. Thanks chiefly to its role as the language of religion, scholarship, and science, Latin words would eventually have a much greater impact on English than French: today, just over 30,000 words (excluding derived forms) have French identified as part of their history in the *OED*; for Latin, the corresponding figure is over 50,000. In literature, a style developed in which authors attempted to emulate the great Classical writers, with intricate sentence patterns and erudite, euphonious vocabulary. The fifteenth-century poet John Lydgate described it as 'aureate'.

When we take into account borrowings from other languages, such as Old Norse and Dutch, we begin to get a sense of the scale of the lexical change that had taken place during Middle English. At the end of the Old English period the size of the lexicon stood at something over 50,000 different words. Many words then fell out of use, but the rate of replacement was such that by the end of the Middle English period we see this total doubled. By 1450, something like half of the available word-stock was non-Germanic. Thanks to the nature of English grammar, which continued to give a high profile to such words as *the, of, and*, and *have*, the fundamental Anglo-Saxon character of the language was maintained. And in vocabulary, too, if we were to order Middle English words in terms of their frequency of use, we would find that around half of the most commonly used words were from Old English.

The real importance of the Middle English period was the way in which this additional vocabulary became the primary means of introducing new concepts and

new domains of discourse into the language, as well as giving novel ways of expression to familiar concepts within old domains of discourse. The period was offering people a much greater linguistic choice. In 1200, people could only *ask*; by 1500 they could *question* (from French) and *interrogate* (from Latin) as well. During Middle English we see the evolution of a language which is increasingly exploiting the potentialities of regional, social, and stylistic variation. At one extreme there was a learnèd, literary style, typically formal and elaborate, characterized by a lexicon of French and Latin origin, and employed by the aristocratic and well-educated; at the other, there was an everyday, popular style, typically informal and casual, full of words with Germanic roots, and used by ordinary folk. The stage was set for the 16th-century literary exploitation of these resources, notably in the poems and plays of Shakespeare.